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A Nationwide Inventory  
of American Imprints  
Under WPA Auspices

*By Douglas C. McMurtrie*

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*An address at the 1938 Conference at Kansas  
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Section on Archives and Libraries*

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*With an Introductory Note*

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fect, described by Mr. McMurtrie. That technique now represents an operating program that is working smoothly and efficiently.

The dragnet thrown out is going to yield a large number of important titles of early American imprints concerning whose publication and location little or nothing was formerly available in print.

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It is an axiom of modern historical research that dependence for accurate record of events can be placed only on contemporary sources. Experience has shown the danger of reliance on secondary sources, or on the recollections of participants in or observers of historical happenings written years after the events transpired. In consequence, scholars in every field of history, whether political, economic, religious, scientific, industrial, or commercial, are turning in every increasing degree to contemporary source material for establishment of fact.

With the notable improvements in library and archival practice made during the present generation, with concurrent enlargement of institutional facilities, source materials of recent date have been relatively well preserved, adequately catalogued, and recorded through a number of mechanisms. But the earlier source materials are as yet imperfectly known, even to the most competent specialists in any field, because of the lack of adequate inventories of such materials and guides to the depositories in which they may be found. ✓



The contemporary source materials for history fall naturally within two categories: materials in manuscript, and materials in print. The former, which are of obvious importance, are not within the scope of the present discussion, which relates only to printed materials. These printed materials may be subdivided into two classifications: (1) newspapers and other periodicals, and (2) books, pamphlets and broadsides. It is the latter group, referred to generally as "imprints," which forms the subject of our present discussion.

Because of their primary contribution to the historical record, the value of newspaper files has been generally recognized and there have been numerous efforts to inventory and record them. Outstanding in this field is the noteworthy bibliography of American newspapers earlier than 1821, compiled by Dr. Clarence S. Brigham, published in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, and now in process of revision and amplification. Newspapers since 1820 have been recorded briefly in the recently issued *Union List of Newspapers*, edited by Miss Winifred Gregory under the auspices of the Bibliographical Society of America. There have also been published lists of the newspapers of individual states or of those in individual libraries. Several monographs deal, though not as adequately, with periodicals other than newspapers.

When we turn, however, to early books, pamphlets and broadsides, we find the record far from complete. Those printed from the beginnings of the press at Cambridge, Mass., in 1639 through the year 1800 were recorded by the late Charles Evans in his monu-

mental *American Bibliography*, twelve volumes of which, extending through the middle of the alphabet for 1799, appeared before his recent death. Completion of the final volume of "Evans" has, most fortunately, been undertaken by the American Antiquarian Society.

Another noteworthy effort to list printed material of American interest was undertaken by Joseph Sabin in his *Dictionary of Books Relating to America*. This work, suspended several times because of Mr. Sabin's death and because of changes of later editors, has recently been brought to conclusion under the brilliant editorship of R. W. G. Vail, also under the auspices of the Bibliographical Society of America. The latter part of "Sabin," as this work is usually referred to, is a model of modern bibliographical practice. The Sabin volumes cover a wide variety of material, including books, pamphlets and broadsides, published over a wide range of dates in many different countries.

Fortunately for the student, both *Evans* and *Sabin* locate titles, though both include many titles which are not located. *Evans* recorded many titles derived from various sources, without giving his authority for so doing. In the latter volumes of *Sabin* the authority for all information is carefully noted.

Both publications represented a first attempt at American historical bibliography on a large scale. Both must be regarded as great achievements, but because they were first efforts both are admittedly incomplete in their record of printed materials within their defined scopes. In addition both, for the most part, recorded titles in a number of important



libraries, and did not adequately represent many special collections in out-of-the-way institutions.

In addition to these two general bibliographies, there have been compiled and published numerous special bibliographies of the earlier issues of the press in individual states and cities, and of material within certain subject classifications. There is no need here to discuss these works in much detail. It may be pointed out, however, that the great majority of them deal with publications originating in the Eastern states. The early printed materials of most of the southern, midwestern and western states have been relatively neglected.

Since Evans revised his date limit to the year 1800 and since Leypoldt's *United States Catalog* did not take up the record again until 1876, this left the books, pamphlets and broadsides printed in the United States between 1800 and 1876 largely unrecorded. In addition there were, of course, many titles before 1801 which were not recorded by Mr. Evans, and many others which were not located or fully described.

Every historian who has done exhaustive work on any subject, will recall having unexpectedly encountered some printed pamphlet of vital importance to his inquiry, which he never had thought existed. And, contrariwise, he will have known, through references to them, of books or pamphlets which he urgently needed to consult, no copies of which he was ever able to locate.

If historical work is to be as effective and thorough as possible, it becomes evident that there are needed some extensive supplements to the existing record of American printed materials. The situation was

helped tremendously by the establishment at the Library of Congress of the great Union Catalog and by the subsequent establishment of local union catalogs which were made possible by WPA labor.

The Union Catalog at the Library of Congress in Washington represents in a single great file, over eight million titles in many of the more important American libraries. The filing is by author only, or by first word of title for anonymous works. If, therefore, the author and title of a pamphlet or book are known, a scholar can ascertain, by consulting the Union Catalog, the library or libraries in which it can be found.

If, however, a scholar is studying some special historical subject, or the history of some specific region or community, he may not know from any available source the titles of a tenth of the books and pamphlets he would like to consult, nor the names of their authors. If, for example, he is studying the early history of any American city, he will look up the few titles he knows. But he also needs a list of every kind of material bearing on the life and activities of that city, which may be preserved in one place or another. Naturally enough, the great majority of such material would have been printed locally.

When he is provided with an adequate inventory of material locally printed during the early years of the community, he will find that one pamphlet of vital importance is to be found only in Cambridge, Massachusetts; three others only in Washington, D. C., one in San Marino, California, two in Providence, Rhode Island, one in Chicago, Illinois, and so on. Previous historians missed the information contained



in these books and pamphlets because they did not even know of their existence. And no historian could expect to know of their existence, unless from some comprehensive bibliographical mechanism giving titles and locations.

If printed historical materials are regarded from this point of view, it is obvious that a thorough inventory of printed matter in hundreds of institutions in hundreds of cities throughout the country is a prerequisite to the most thorough possible historical work in any local field. How, then is such a bibliographical mechanism to be provided?

Realizing this need, the Historical Records Survey, a Federal activity of the Women's & Professional Projects Division of the Works Progress Administration, undertook early in 1937, as a part of its regular work, the preparation of a nationwide inventory of American printed materials within certain specified date limits. Those date limits extended through 1820 for the states along the Atlantic seaboard, through 1840 for the states such as Ohio and Kentucky, through 1850 for the states such as Wisconsin and Missouri, through 1876 for the states along the Pacific seaboard, and through 1890 for certain states of the Rocky Mountain region and the Western plains.

The state directors of the Historical Records Survey were instructed to undertake the Inventory of American Imprints to such an extent as the resources of their staff and the demands of the work previously undertaken might permit. Some states were able to accomplish considerable work, others little work, still others none. However, enough progress was made to

demonstrate to historians and bibliographers the value of such a project to the record of historical materials, and the authorities of the Works Progress Administration approved the further extension of the imprints work, either by workers on the state quotas of the Historical Records Survey or by special state-wide projects which might be set up for this specific purpose in individual states.

When it became evident that resources large enough to make it possible to carry through a comprehensive inventory of American printed materials, the date limits originally established were revised upward to include all imprints to the year 1876, the year in which Leypoldt's *United States Catalog* first appeared.

This revision in date limits was made on the emphatic recommendation of leading librarians, who wished to see carried through the program originally conceived by the late H. H. B. Meyer, former bibliographer of the Library of Congress, to fill in the gap in the record of American publishing between Evans and Leypoldt.

For many years, Mr. Meyer picked out and set aside one printed card for every title dated from 1801 to 1876 which was catalogued by the Library of Congress, and he intended to devote the leisure of his retirement to round out a satisfactory list. But his death soon after his retirement cut short the project. Professor James T. Gerould, Princeton's librarian, took up the project and recommended it to the WPA authorities.

Recognizing the amount of work involved in carrying such a project through to completion, Dr. Luther



H. Evans, national director of the Historical Records Survey, decided early in 1937, with the full approval of the present writer, that it would be inadvisable to undertake it, with the resources in man-hours then available. The recent sharp increase in the need for relief employment, made it feasible to extend the date limits of the American Imprints Inventory. It was determined to carry the record of imprints for all the states through the year 1876, with the limit of 1890 for eight western states in which printing began relatively late: Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Utah.

As to editing titles and the preparation and issue of check lists, attention will be concentrated first on material within the original date limits already mentioned. But when and if it becomes possible to work the material within the later date periods, the titles will be available. It is quite possible that these later titles may be utilized and made available in two ways: (1) in the form of regional lists of imprints, and (2) in a form similar to that of the United States Catalog, including only books issued by trade publishers.

The extension of date limit was enthusiastically approved by many bibliographers and historians in the southern states for the reason that the Inventory will now include record of all Confederate imprints.

At the present time, work by the staff of the Historical Records Survey is being done in many states, and special statewide imprints projects have been approved and are in operation in numerous other states. At the present time almost a thousand workers have been assigned to the imprints program, and further

increase is planned, in order to permit thorough coverage of printed materials in American libraries.

In Massachusetts, for example, seventy workers on a special statewide project have been combing the libraries of that state for imprints since the beginning of the present calendar year. At the present time over twenty-five workers are taking advantage of the academic vacation to examine the four million cards in the catalogue of Harvard College Library, and copy the titles coming within our date limits. Twenty people have been working on a state project in Connecticut, covering the many important libraries in that state and fifteen are recording titles in Rhode Island libraries. Work in the other New England states will be done by workers on the regular staff of the Historical Records Survey.

In Pennsylvania, an average of eight workers have for the past nine months been going through the three million cards in the Philadelphia Union Catalogue and copying for the Imprints Inventory all titles within its date limits. It is needless to say that many valuable imprints, many of which were thought to be entirely lost, have been brought to light during the course of this work. Other workers are assigned to libraries at other points throughout the state.

In Mississippi, a state in which little bibliographical work has previously been attempted, a vigorous imprint Inventory is now being prosecuted under competent direction.

In Kentucky, Iowa, and Missouri, special projects with generous staffs are reporting the holdings, catalogued and uncatalogued, of local libraries. In Kan-



sas, workers on the staff of the Survey have almost completed the first attempt at a bibliography of the early press of that state. In Arizona, there has been completed the field work on which can be based a check list of Arizona imprints of 1860-1890, which will soon appear in a mimeographed volume. An extensive list of Chicago ante-fire imprints of 1851-1871 inclusive has been completed and will soon be issued.

In California, work at the Henry E. Huntington Library has been underway for many months, resulting in a full record of its rich collection of early American imprints. In northern California, crews of workers are already recording the titles in a dozen different institutions. Imprints work is being done currently in Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and a number of other western states.

It is possible here to mention only a few of the states in which active work is now being carried on. Soon the imprints program will be actively underway in all the states.

✓ Simple but comprehensive instructions for supervisors and workers throughout the country have been prepared, in order that the work from coast to coast shall be as uniform as possible. Uniform title slips, printed four on a sheet, with indication of the areas reserved for author, place of printing and date, are used throughout the country.

*not. office*  
✓ Since the essence of the American Imprints Inventory lies in the exchange of records among all the states, it is obvious that a national filing and clearing office is an essential. For certain reasons this national clearing office has been set up in Chicago in the Illinois office of the Historical Records Survey. This

office affords the local authorities of the Historical Records Survey and all cooperating statewide imprints projects advice as to practice. It also receives and files records and edits for publication the lists of imprints thus cooperatively produced. ✓

The work of the American Imprints Inventory is under the administrative direction of Luther H. Evans, national director of the Historical Records Survey, who has delegated the technical direction of the bibliographical work to the present writer, who was named consultant to the national director. Local authorities of the Historical Records Survey and of the statewide projects are advised to look to the consultant for advice in planning programs and for instructions on technical aspects of the work. Titles recorded in the field are mailed in weekly installments to the consultant, thus giving him and his staff opportunity to check the work currently, to correct errors in practice, and to make suggestions regarding possible improvements in style or procedure. *procedure*

Most of the work will be done in libraries or in public institutions maintaining libraries. Titles found and recorded as being in public institutions are of the greatest value to the student, for two reasons: (1) their location presumably is permanent, and (2) they are readily accessible for consultation to anyone desiring to use them.

It is true that there are many rare and valuable books and pamphlets in private collections, and it will be desirable to record as many of these as possible. It is our judgment, however, that work in private collections should not be undertaken until the public institutions in any particular state are well covered.



It is believed that man hours can be put to far better advantage, from the viewpoint of results, in public institutions, than in private libraries.

✓✓ Work on the Inventory of American Imprints naturally divides itself into two stages, which we may conveniently designate as primary and secondary. The primary stage will consist of the original listing in greater or less detail, of all books, pamphlets and broadsides which can be found in local libraries and institutions. In the secondary phases of the work the titles so recorded, filed in the Chicago office and checked against other titles reported from all other parts of the country, will be checked to ascertain which are adequately known and which are previously unknown or unreported from other localities. It is these latter imprints, of course, that have the greatest potential value to historians.

✓ Titles found to be rare or of special interest must then be recorded in far greater detail and with greater thoroughness than it would be sensible to undertake on the primary listing. The Chicago office then will ask the local workers or library authorities to examine such imprints in detail and give complete information very carefully checked as to accuracy.

Conceiving the program of work in these two stages makes it possible to do the primary field work in a rapid, yet effective, manner. Since the practice of different libraries in cataloguing their books and pamphlets varies greatly in style and detail, the primary record taken must necessarily reflect these differences. The same books may be catalogued by one library in a twelve-line title, and by another in a three-line title. If the workers in the library which

catalogs the book in three lines were forced to call for every single book and pamphlet and write out full descriptions of them, our work would be made needlessly difficult and slow.

What will happen is that in most instances a book or pamphlet will be reported to the Chicago office from several libraries. One of these will have catalogued the title with the greatest thoroughness, and all of this material will have been copied by our worker. Another will have catalogued it with reasonable thoroughness, while a third will have catalogued it briefly. However, the briefest of the descriptions will then be sufficient to identify all three entries as referring certainly to the same publication. The Chicago office then will take the most complete description as its master card and add to it the locations of the other copies reported in less detail. If a book or pamphlet not described with thoroughness turns out to be rare or unique, the Chicago office then will ask for a full description. This method of procedure will greatly minimize the burden on libraries throughout the country.

It should be explained that, in addition to inventorying the holdings of libraries, there are two other strings to our bow in endeavoring to build up as complete a record as possible of American printing. The second aspect of our program calls for checking all reliable bibliographies and catalogues, and copying therefrom American titles within our date limits. All of the titles in Evans' *American Bibliography* have already been copied on slips, which are filed by place of printing and date. We are now dealing in similar fashion with Sabin, Hildeburn, and many



other bibliographies. Some subject lists prove exceedingly helpful. Such a procedure gives us the best possible means of checking one authority against another.

One of the most ambitious undertakings of this character is the checking of all the volumes of the printed British Museum Catalogue for American imprints, which is being done by a special unit of our workers in Detroit. Surprising though it may seem, this procedure turns up many titles not found in any American library. For example, if one were to study early banking in the southern states, it would be fatal to overlook the printed materials in the British Museum.

Catalogues of booksellers and of auction sales often record the titles of unique copies of imprints which are purchased by private collectors, and for a period disappear from view. For this reason we are checking catalogues of the leading dealers in Americana and of the important public sales at which American titles have changed hands to obtain record of some elusive material.

The third source of information is advertisements or other notices in newspapers. Of many early imprints no copy can be found, yet indisputable evidence of their printing and distribution may be gained from advertisements in contemporary newspapers that such-and-such an oration, or sermon, or report was "just published and for sale at the printing office." Examination of early newspaper files for such advertisements enables us to construct an almost complete record of the local press of the period. In addition to putting on record imprints of which no copy has been found, these advertisements often give us val-

uable additional information regarding the date of issue, authorship, etc., of publications which have been located.

These advertisements also serve to identify the source of many unlocated titles in Evans, Hildeburn, and other bibliographies, which have proved puzzling to bibliographers of the present generation.

What is being and what will be done with the titles assembled in our central file? In the first place, title slips as fast as they are edited are cleared through the Union Catalog. The slips for titles not already recorded in it are retained and filed. Those for titles already in the Union Catalog are returned to us with notation of additional locations.

For the western states especially, it is possible for us to make a considerable contribution to the completeness of the Union Catalog. The Catalog has retained, as previously unrecorded, over 90% of the title slips for certain states, and retention of over 70% of the titles sent in is far from infrequent. The percentage of new titles is, of course, far lower for lists of imprints of eastern states, but even among these the contribution is consequential.

One significant result of this cooperation is that the Union Catalog will come to represent more completely the resources of American libraries, both large and small, on the beaten track and off it, from coast to coast. The value of this rounding out of the record demands, I believe, no argument.

The second use of our titles is to assemble them into lists of imprints of individual states, within determined date limits, which are issued in the form of mimeographed volumes. Two series of such pub-



lications are already being issued, and at least one more series is projected.

The first series of bulletins are designated as *Imprints Memoranda*, and consist of informal short-title lists, the chief purpose of which is to provide our workers in any state with a foundation on which to build. In these memoranda are listed the imprints of a state or community already known, any claim to completeness or perfection of detail being specifically disavowed.

The second series of publications are designated as *Check Lists*, which represent reasonably good lists of the early imprints of a given state, issued with two aims in view: to invite and stimulate additions and corrections; and to prove useful to librarians, historians, and others until a better and more comprehensive list can supplant them.

A third series of *Bibliographies* is projected. These will incorporate additions to and revisions of the check lists, including titles turned up by more extensive field work.

If the work of the Historical Records Survey continues, it may be possible later on to issue a series of subject bibliographies based on classifications of the titles recorded. But on this point no promises can now be made.

As may be apparent from this outline of our program, for putting material on record, the American Imprints Inventory is committed to a policy of progressive bibliography. The perfect bibliography remains yet to be issued. The man who defers publication of any bibliography until it can be perfected, usually dies before his work is complete, his widow is

left with a mass of manuscript notes on her hands, and his material never sees the light of day.

It seems far more logical, as well as more practical, when a list of references reaches the stage when it will be useful to librarians and others, to issue it in some preliminary form. Its appearance leads interested authorities to check it, and report errors and omissions. Such checking contributes more to the ultimate perfection of the list when published in revised form than could years of additional single-handed effort. And until the appearance of the improved list, the preliminary publication is likely to prove valuable to many people in different ways. And if, by some trick of fate, the projected revised edition does not get published the "half loaf" already in circulation will prove truly more useful than "no bread." There is nothing more fruitless or more indefensible than the research project which runs on for years, assembling material of value, and is cut off before any of that material is made available to those who have need of it.

It is planned eventually to deposit the imprint catalogue now being developed in the Library of Congress, if that institution wishes to take it over.

The need for and utility of an inventory of imprints on such a scale may be questioned by some. Few librarians doubt the need for a record of the American press between 1800 and 1876, but some argue that the earlier period has been adequately covered.

Let us be quite concrete in our discussion of this question. Take North Carolina as an example. A recent bibliography of North Carolina imprints



tripled the number of *located* titles in the best previously-published list. And, after several years of careful searching expended on this recent list, the work of the Historical Records Survey brought to light seven printed documents of the pre-Revolutionary period—all of major importance historically. One was the *Proceedings of the Committee of Correspondence of Newbern*, 1775, which was reproduced in facsimile for distribution to librarians attending the Kansas City meeting of the American Library Association. Four others were journals of legislative sessions previously unknown in printed form and two were North Carolina session laws. Only a week ago a hitherto unrecorded North Carolina imprint of 1797 was reported by workers of the Historical Records Survey in Philadelphia. Are such discoveries worth making?

Florida imprints of the early period are unusually rare. No printed record of Masonic activity, for example, was found in that state, but a full set of Grand Lodge proceedings from 1823 onward was found in a library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

In Cleveland there is an historical society which is exceedingly rich in local material. Yet it had always been thought that the first pamphlet printed in that city was an almanac for 1828. But one of our workers in the Congregational Library in Boston reported a sermon printed in Cleveland in 1822, and a play printed there in 1820 turned up in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

One of our workers was listing, in a Pittsburgh library, a group of pamphlets as yet uncatalogued. She turned in a short title for one booklet, with no

way of knowing, of course, whether it was of great or little value. The place of printing was apparently lacking for the imprint read: "Shawnee Mission Press, 1835." This was recognized, when it reached our editorial office, as an imprint of the second year of printing in Kansas, no copy of which had previously been found, although the fact that the pamphlet was printed was known from the journal of the printer, Jotham Meeker. The photostat can thus provide Kansas historians with one more evidence of activity of their state's early printing press.

The earliest Illinois imprint is in New Jersey, the earliest issue of the New Mexican press is in the District of Columbia, the earliest pamphlet printed in Alabama is in California. And many later imprints are of even greater historical significance. How is the scholar in any local field to know where the important materials bearing on his field are to be found, except through the development of a comprehensive bibliographical mechanism such as is now in the making?

In this effort to build up the record of the printed source materials for American history, the cooperation of the librarians of the country is most earnestly solicited.



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